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J. FRANCIS AITKEN

AN APPRECIATIVE SKETCH

PAUL E. BECHET, M.D.
NEW YORK

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This paper does not pretend to be a biography, an obituary or a eulogy. My sole reason for its presentation is my deep affection for Aitken, which has extended over many years, and I hope that I may make him seem real to those who did not know him and refresh the memories of those who knew him well.

In many respects Aitken was an extraordinary person. He was a member of no dermatologic society other than the Section of Dermatology and Syphilis of the New York Academy of Medicine, the sessions of which he attended irregularly and only as a listener. He refused all offices and did little, if any, writing; yet he was considered one of the most eminent clinicians in New York and second to none in diagnostic ability. In my opinion, based on intimate contact with him for twenty years, this seeming neglect of the higher things in dermatology was due entirely to an innate modesty and diffidence; he hated the lime-light to such an extent that he could not be induced to air his opinions in public, but in his own circle of intimates he did not hesitate to venture his views, and they always proved of great value. Aitken was highly intelligent, with great reasoning ability and a marked degree of common sense. This combination of qualities, together with the personal inspection and therapeutic direction of, conservatively, some 10,000 patients a year for forty-four years, developed him into a master clinician, with a thorough knowledge of the many-faceted variations of the commoner dermatoses.

It must be difficult for the younger dermatologists to realize the diagnostic ability and therapeutic results attained by the pioneers of yesterday. These eminent dermatologists made up for their lack of laboratory facilities with unusually trained analytic and photographic minds, together with exhaustive clinical notes and an extraordinary development of what might be called sight diagnosis and what I sometimes call the sixth dermatologic sense. Jonathan Hutchinson is a good example of a physician with this peculiar gift, as is also Alfred Fournier. Their therapeutic results were surprisingly good. The old-fashioned curet, the electric needle, the cautery point, the comedo extractor and

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even an ointment accomplished results which would surprise and even astound the fledgling dermatologist of today, accustomed as he is to the innumerable paraphernalia of the modern dermatologist's office.

Of all the physicians who have served the New York Skin and Cancer Hospital, I believe that I can say, without fear of contradiction, that J. Francis Aitken gave more of himself in its service than any one else. He was house physician from Dec. 1, 1883, to Dec. 1, 1884, and thereafter became, successively, clinical assistant, assistant physician and attending physician; he held the last position until a year or so before his death on Aug. 3, 1930. Therefore, for forty-four years he attended the hospital three days a week, and during the twenty years that I knew him he never failed to be present at 2 p. m., never missed a day, other than a few weeks in the summer, always faithfully made his rounds and attended meetings of the Medical Board, and this in all kinds of weather, no matter how ill he might have felt at times. Such was his service, and in my estimation it deserves far more recognition from a hospital than the greatest of financial contributions. Such a record deserves to be emblazoned to high heaven and serve as an example to all physicians.

Aitken was born on Oct. 28, 1851, and graduated from the Bellevue Medical College on March 14, 1883. He was the first to serve as house physician at the New York Skin and Cancer Hospital. When he became the only member of its house staff the hospital had been in existence for almost a year, as it was opened on Jan. 11, 1883. The entire staff consisted of L. Duncan Bulkley and George Henry Fox as attending physicians and Daniel Lewis and W. T. Alexander as assistants. A special department for internal cancer in females was in charge of J. B. Hunter and J. D. Anway. In the first year 774 patients were treated, including 49 with cancer. This was the cradle of Aitken's dermatologic life. It was here that he developed the diagnostic acumen which we admired so much. He was probably the greatest exponent and propagandist of sight diagnosis in dermatology whom I can recall. I have frequently heard Fred Wise express the wish for the return of sight diagnosis as taught by Aitken in preference to complete dependence on laboratory reports. Aitken always made a diagnosis first; he disliked having any one question the patient until all had expressed an opinion. Such a method naturally stimulated his keenness of observation, and that was exactly what he always tried to inculcate in all his associates. He occasionally "muffed" a diagnosis, as he was the first to admit, but his accuracy, on the whole, was phenomenal. Even at times when his subordinates thought that he was wrong, time proved him eventually right. He liked to surround himself with his staff and make every one, even the youngest intern, offer a diagnosis and then patiently point out the many mistakes that we had made.

He was especially fond of the diagnosis pityriasis maculata et circinata, which, as may be surmised, is better designated as pityriasis rosea; yet in the use of the former term he had distinguished company, for both Bázin and Hardy used it in describing pityriasis rosea long after Gibert had given it its proper name. He resented most being told the latest theories by the youngest "know-it-all," which is so common in every clinic; at such times, particularly if it had been a hard and hot afternoon, he would literally explode.

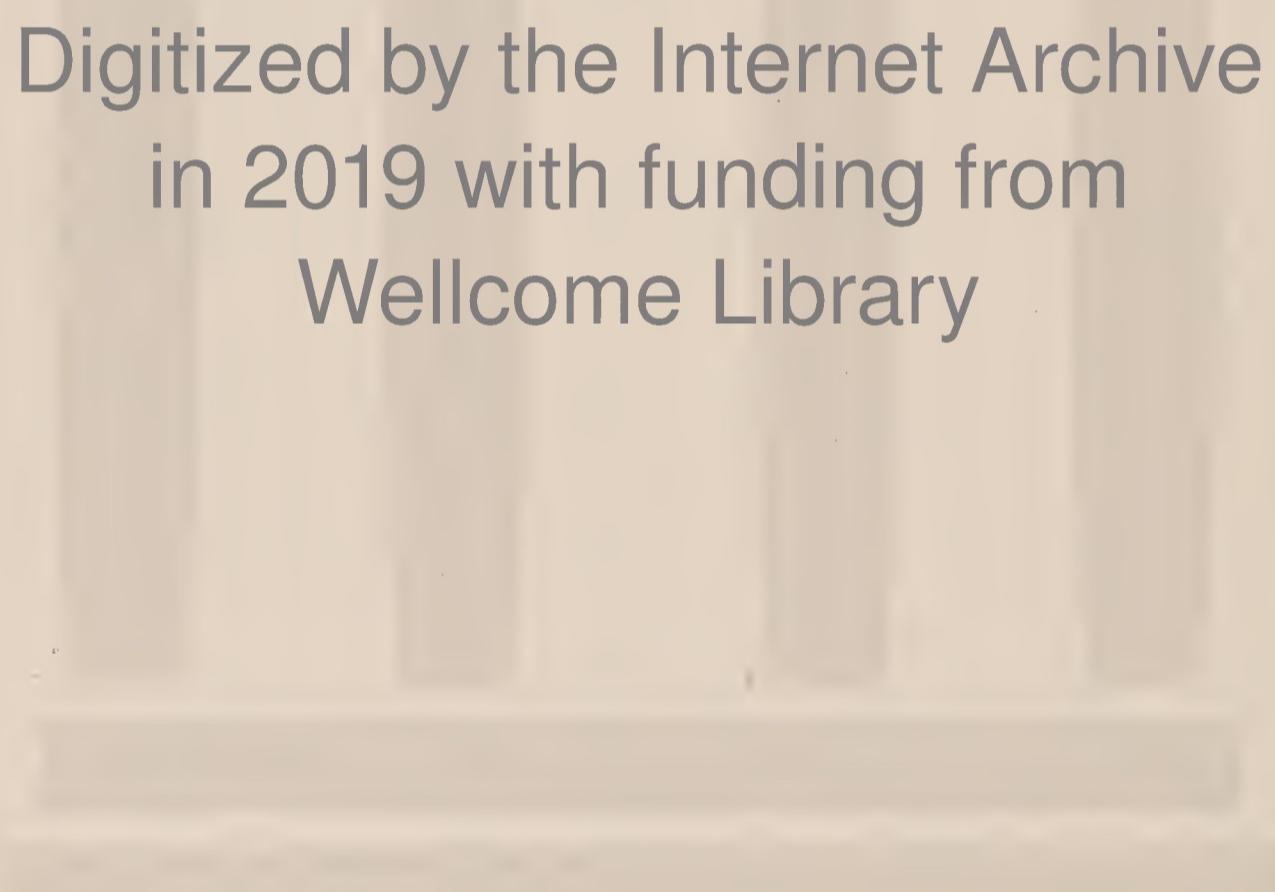
After all the patients had been seen he often regaled us with tales of old New York. In his younger days he was fond of horse-racing, and he always drove a handsome pair of bays. He had a convivial nature and often spent an afternoon or evening at the old Hoffman House or some other well known hostelry with such old cronies as Stuyvesant Fish and Stanford White.

I believe that it was during Aitken's incumbency at the clinic that a woman suffering from chronic eczema misunderstood the instructions and swallowed a teaspoonful of calamine lotion three times a day for a week and at the same time generously patted on the eruption her rhubarb and soda mixture. On her return after a week of this bizarre treatment, instead of presenting alarming signs of phenol poisoning, she seemed greatly improved, whereupon an ointment containing 4 per cent rhubarb was used for many years in the clinic in the treatment of eczema.

Aitken was stout and florid. On hot days great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He always was in shirt-sleeves and occasionally wore vivid-colored garters on his arms. He always carried the largest magnifying glass that I have ever seen, through which he peered at the patients and with which he would scare the wits out of them when he was especially vehement.

Aitken sought no honors. He did not even get an appointment as Attending Physician at the hospital until 1912, thereby serving twenty-eight years as an assistant, despite his great ability and faithful attendance. He invariably referred to a superintendent who took herself most seriously as "the Matron," much to her obvious disgust. Aitken always remained aloof from hospital politics, and when he did take sides it was always for justice's sake. He was guileless, and his rough exterior covered a great heart.

He practiced in the same location on East Thirty-Fifth Street for more than fifty years, and in that time he brought comfort and relief to many sufferers. I remained at his elbow for twenty years, and the proudest moments of my life were when he called me "son," which he frequently did in his later years. J. Francis Aitken lived and died fearlessly. He loved life, his specialty and his fellow-men. Need more be said other than that we who knew him best loved him most?



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